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ABSTRACT

Questionnaires were completed by superintendents and special education teachers on the delivery of services to special education children of military dependents in a state with several military installations. Questionnaires addressed such issues as availability of services, program evaluation, knowledgability of military families regarding federal and state mandates, and their need for assistance. Results revealed that superintendents and teachers of the mildly handicapped generally believed that services were adequate while teachers of moderately to severely/profoundly handicapped students believed services to be inadequate and improvement needed. Data indicated the needs for respite care, development of standardized forms to ensure educational continuity despite mores, and provision of parent workshops to keep them informed of their rights as well as of local support agencies. (Author/CL)

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Special Education Children of Military Families:

A Survey of Present Services

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Abstract

A study was undertaken to determine the perception of school superintendents and special education teachers concerning the delivery of services to special education children of military dependents in a state with several military installations. The groups were asked to complete a survey questionnaire covering such topics as availability of services, evaluation of program, knowledgeability of military families of federal and state mandates, need for assistance, etc.

The superintendents and teachers of the mildly handicapped generally believed that services were adequate. The teachers of the moderately to severely/profoundly handicapped believed services to be inadequate and improvement needed. Discussion of problems and possible means of remediation are presented.

Special Education Children of Military Families: A Survey of Present Services

The advent of Public Law 94-142 (Education for All Handicapped Children Act) has prompted increased concern about the delivery of appropriate services to special education children. In states with large military installations, the problem of delivery of appropriate services to military families with special education children is an additional concern. Are there factors inherent in military life which make the delivery and/or availability of appropriate special education services to military families more difficult? Are there ways in which military and/or civilian agencies could improve the delivery of such services?

Literature Search

The developmentally disabled dependent of a military family has been almost totally ignored in the professional literature. Hunter et al. (1980) in an annotated bibliography covering the literature on military families did not list a single reference pertaining to handicapping conditions. In a review of Navy family research commissioned by the Office of Naval Research, Croan et al. (1980) identify 108 specific research areas covered in the literature; handicapping conditions were not mentioned in their text. One report commissioned by

the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations (1978) and a second report by Van Vranken et al. (1980) briefly noted the difficulties of military families with handicapped dependents, but never as a central issue. Little's review (1971) of military institutions stated that both the Army and Air Force have duty station transfer policies to aid such families, but noted that requirements and loopholes make such procedures ineffectual. Snyder et al. (1981) found Little's review still relevant.

Methodology

The author attempted to ascertain whether or not the delivery of services to special education children of military families needed to be or could be improved. In order to view the problem from an administrative perspective, survey questionnaires were mailed to superintendents of twenty school systems in a southern state (return rate 95%) which were felt to contain sizeable numbers of military dependents due to the proximity of military installations. Upon completion of the administrative questionnaire, similar survey items were sent to seventy (return rate 92.9%) special education teachers within the same southern state. This area was chosen for the following reasons: 1) the proximity of the area to a local university; 2) the location of large military installations within the area; 3) the ease of follow-up of mailed questionnaires; and 4) the availability of teachers for follow-up interviews.

Superintendent Survey

The superintendents or their representatives were asked to complete

a survey instrument concerning special education dependents of military families. Questions were asked as to whether or not statistics were kept on military families; whether military families fully understood their rights under Public Law 94-142; whether they perceived any difference in the military families based on branch of service; whether the state and/or federal government could somehow improve or aid in the delivery of services for special education children of military families; and whether or not their school systems contained any apparatus to assist military families with special education children.

Teacher Survey

The teachers included in the survey were all special education teachers in a southern state containing a large military population. The teachers chosen reflected the various types of handicapping conditions usually represented within any school system; i.e., mentally retarded, learning disabled, emotionally disturbed, visually impaired, hearing impaired, communication disorders, physically handicapped, multiply handicapped.

Results

Superintendent Survey

The superintendents were unanimous in their statement that no separate statistical information was kept for military dependents. From an administrative viewpoint, it appears that such information need not be kept.

The superintendents also believed that there was no overall difference in the knowledgeability of military families concerning federal and/or state mandates, pertaining to special education, as compared to non-military families. The superintendents further believed that there was no difference in military families based on branch of service. The superintendents saw no differences based on type of handicapping condition in terms of any of the survey items.

All the system superintendents felt an adequate job was being performed with respect to special education children of military families, although none possessed any special apparatus to verify such beliefs. The system superintendents felt that no assistance by state and/or federal agencies was needed.

In conclusion, the administrative portion of the school systems surveyed believed that military families with special education children were by and large: 1) knowledgeable about the law; 2) well served; 3) homogeneous across services; and 4) in no need for any type of improved state and/or federal assistance.

Teacher Survey

The results of the teacher survey indicated a dichotomy with respect to the problems of military families with special education children. For the most part, teachers of the mild handicapping conditions; i.e., learning disabled, educable mentally retarded, speech and communication disorders, believed that records are adequate, military life not overly disruptive, parents adequately knowledgeable, etc. Generally, the

teachers of such children saw no need for any types of additional intervention for special education dependents of military families.

The teachers of moderately handicapped to severely/profoundly handicapped children; i.e., trainable mentally retarded, severely/profoundly mentally retarded, physically handicapped, multiply handicapped, deaf, blind, severely emotionally disturbed, see things in a different manner. Their criticisms were almost universal and always vehement. For such teachers the problem is of major proportions, requiring immediate intervention. The areas of concern, listed by the teachers, were as follows:

1. Medical. The medical records are incomplete and slow in forthcoming. Standard school system forms are checked off, as needed, but the spaces for an attached narrative are blank. The kind of information which the teachers of the moderately and severely/profoundly handicapped need in order to formulate appropriate Individual Educational Plans--e.g., medications and need for future surgeries--is rarely given.
2. Educational records. The educational records of moderately to severely/profoundly handicapped children although punctual are usually incomplete. Psychological evaluations and Individual Educational Plans are often missing forcing additional communication with the previous system. The lost time in continuity of educational programming, so very important for these children, is damaging.
3. Parents. The teachers, contrary to the views expressed by administrators, believe that military parents of special

education children are uninformed of their rights under state and federal mandates. The teachers place the blame for this lack of information squarely on military medicine; i.e., if doctors are aware of such information, they fail to pass it on to parents. Another characteristic noted by many teachers is a passive, fatalistic nature exhibited by military parents. When questioned on follow-up, the teachers were unsure as to whether this might be due to ignorance of the law, the uprootedness caused by military rotation, or some other factor.

4. The Navy vs. other branches. The teachers felt that Navy families had a more difficult time. The first factor cited involved the long separation inherent in sea duty. A second factor cited by teachers involved the financial strain caused by the inability of the mother to work full time when needed or desired. The mother can work only at part-time occupations, when the moderately to severely/profoundly handicapped child is in school, since few day-care centers or babysitters can be found for such children.
5. Moving. The need for continuity in the educational programming of moderately to severely/profoundly handicapped children is disrupted by duty station rotation. The educational, medical and familial problems cited above are often exacerbated by duty station rotation.
6. Lack of knowledge concerning availability of local services and agencies. It is the teachers' belief that military families with special education children never avail themselves of the

local services for which they might be eligible. The close-knit relationships fostered in military housing, plus a military bureaucracy also largely ignorant of these services, were often cited as the reasons for this problem.

7. Future of a moving target. As the handicapped child gets older, concerns about future possibilities arise. The waiting lists for sheltered workshops, group homes, residential institutions, etc., are often long. How does a military family with a handicapped child requiring services get on the list? Assuming the child gains entrance into a program, what happenes if the military decides it is time for a change of duty station?

Discussion

It would appear at first glance that the administrators, teachers of the mildly handicapped and teachers of the moderately to severely/profoundly handicapped, surveyed for this paper, do not work for the same school systems. The discrepancies between the two groups can be explained, however, and in a way that does not disparage any group.

According to the school administrators, their systems are providing adequate services for all special education children (including military dependents) within their schools. There was nothing found in this survey that would contradict this statement. The teachers of the mildly handicapped concur with this view.

The teachers of the moderately to severely/profoundly handicapped, however, always appeared to be answering the questionnaires in terms

of individual cases with which they were acquainted. As someone very familiar with military families, on an individual basis, they are much more able to see the proble s of military families and the inadequacy of present structures, both military and civilian, to handle such problems.

The administrators tend to view the problem in terms of global policy as established by their school boards. The teachers tend to view the problem in terms of the daily frustrations which confront military families with handicapped children. Each group is right; neither is wrong.

Where problems have been cited it would appear that a joint effort between LEA's and the military could alleviate many of the problems stated previously. The development of standardized forms, thoroughly filled out, and immediately available to the new school district, could make for improved educational continuity.

LEA's could conduct periodic workshops for military families keeping them informed of their rights and responsibilities under federal and state mandates, while at the same time making available information of local support agencies--e.g., National Association for Retarded Citizens (NARC), United Cerebral Palsy (UCP), etc.

The armed services must seek to develop a military-wide policy on duty station rotation for families with moderately to severely/profoundly handicapped children. The standard rotation leads to interruptions, relocation, reevaluation, replacement, etc. Too much valuable educational time is lost and the availability of local services often too difficult

to obtain (e.g., time spent on a waiting list). This becomes of paramount importance as the dependent enters the teen years and decisions concerning future employment and placement are being developed. (The director of a state training school and hospital with a large number of military dependents, in discussing this problem, points out that some military families place their children at the training school; when the family eventually moves to another duty station, they are left behind. After a certain time, the dependents become wards of the state. The director states that this tactic, although a radical solution, is an understandable placement alternative considering present service policies.)

Given the pressures and hardships of military life, the development of a program of respite care for the families of moderately to severely/profoundly handicapped children, through either military or civilian agencies, may help to ease some of the problems cited in previous sections.

Conclusion

At the present time, the delivery of services to military families with handicapped children appears to be of a two-tier nature. For children with mildly handicapping conditions, services appear to be well provided and there appears little need for assistance from any type of support agency.

For military parents of moderately to severely/profoundly handicapped children, however, there is much that could be done to improve

the delivery of appropriate services. The main thrust of assistance should entail the coordination of information and services from the military to both parents and schools. The information needed by the school systems is largely of a medical nature, while the services needed by parents cover such areas as information about special education laws, family counseling, respite care, and altered rotation and sea duty policies. The military services need to develop a service-wide policy to assist the families under discussion.

The findings presented in this study are applicable only to the southern state surveyed and additional research is needed to ascertain if similar findings would occur in other parts of the country. However, the size of the military installations and the number of families involved in this one area may be applicable to similar areas.

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